

**Interview with former CPL David Schwirian, USMC assigned to Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 3 January 2006.**

**What was your unit?**

Lima Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines. CAPT [John] Ripley was my company commander. The platoon commander was LT Hansel Osborne. He's since passed away.

**According to the story, you guys were ordered to set up an ambush.**

Yes, out west of Ca Lu out on Highway 9.

**What do you remember about that?**

I remember that it rained but on the way out to set up the ambush, it must have cleared because I recall seeing some flashy lights up in the mountains. Then we went on and set up the ambush about dusk. I set up in the middle and I had a machine gunner on one side and a rocket man on the other side with an automatic weapon. The radioman was to my right and my corpsman was behind us. We were on a turn so that we could fire in either direction down the road in case something came up from either direction.

We were making radio checks every half hour. We clicked the mike key on the radio. We wouldn't talk but just key the mike. There was a code—either 1 or 2 clicks. This was about 11 or 11:30 at night and you couldn't see a hand in front of your face. There was supposed to be a click but I didn't hear it. I was reaching over to see whether my radioman was awake or whether he made that connection. And when I reached over, the tiger grabbed my right arm from behind. I didn't know it was there until it grabbed me. And at that time I didn't know what it was.

**How did you fend him off?**

We don't really know even though we said that I punched him in the nose. But I'm not sure that happened. On these patrols I kept a K-bar knife in between my legs because I always sat up. Well, that K-bar was missing; we don't know what happened to it. I don't know whether I stuck it in the tiger or it just got lost in the shuffle.

**Did you hear him at all?**

No I didn't. I heard nothing until the tiger ran away. It sounded like a freight train.

**So he grabbed your right arm and was trying to tear it off. And then he let go because you may have punched him in the nose.**

I don't remember. I went into shock right after that and don't remember very much.

**It must have hurt like hell.**

Actually it didn't. The tiger had severed the nerve because he had taken so much muscle out. There was no feeling in that arm whatsoever. And because it was so dark, there was no way to see what the damage was. The corpsman had one of those Bic lighters and was able to assess what had happened. He said I was in bad condition and he needed to get me out of there.

The corpsman then tried to wrap me up without any lights. He was also trying to call out on the radio while he was trying to patch me up. Because it was so dark, the first time he tried,

he wrapped the microphone from the radio up in the bandages and had to take it all apart and re-do it.

**So the radioman wasn't working the radio.**

That's right. I don't know why; you'd have to ask him. Anyway, the corpsman was trying to get permission to break the ambush. But back in Headquarters, they were having a hard time trying to comprehend what was going on and it took them 30 minutes or so to decide to let us break the ambush and leave.

**Did the corpsman give you morphine?**

The corpsman and I decided that I would walk back with him as far as I could until I couldn't walk anymore. Then he would give me morphine. Up until that point, as I said, I had no feeling in the arm and it wasn't hurting.

But about two-thirds of the way back I got to the point where I had probably lost so much blood that I couldn't go any further. So they took some rifles and ponchos, made a stretcher, and carried me the rest of the way in.

**Did you go back along Highway 9?**

Right. There was a bridge we had to cross and had to do it single-file. We have no idea how we crossed that bridge with no lights.

**Were you afraid of enemy contact at that point?**

Oh, yes. We were trying to move as quickly as possible to get back inside the perimeter before we got caught. That was a big concern and that's why we wanted to break the ambush as soon as possible. When that tiger got me, I must have made enough noise to wake up Laos.

**So when this tiger was attacking you, you must have been hollering blue murder.**

Right. But we're talking milliseconds here. It was very quick.

**But you never saw the thing at all?**

No. I didn't even know it was there.

**Did they carry you into Delta Med?**

No. They carried me back to the company at Ca Lu. There were restrictions that kept them from flying the choppers. So we had to wait for daylight to take a dump truck and a jeep back to Delta Med. They had me in a bunker until daylight came.

**Were you in shock at this point?**

Yes, I was. At that point, they gave me morphine and they had me stand for some reason. They then put me in the company commander's hooch. They didn't want me going to sleep so they kept me awake.

When daylight came, they put me in a jeep. A squad riding in the dump truck escorted us back.

At the same time, they sent another squad back to the ambush site during the daylight and found the tiger tracks which confirmed that it was a tiger. I had talked to the corpsman. His

name was Doc Fuss. He lived in Lincoln, NE, and I had an opportunity to talk with him before he passed away in 2000.

**So they drove you back to Delta Med?**

Right. And then from Delta Med to . . .

**Do you remember anything from Delta Med?**

I remember a corpsman pouring some saline solution on my arm and I went ballistic. I think he had given me a shot underneath my arm and when he put the saline on it to clean it, I went out and was out until they were wheeling me down the ramp from the chopper into the USS *Sanctuary*. I remember guys sitting along the hallway as they rolled me down that hallway right into the operating room. I didn't know how serious my wounds were but here they were putting me ahead of all these guys who had wounds themselves. Later they told me I was within millimeters of losing my arm.

**Did the surgeon do a skin graft on you?**

He put everything back together but left the wound open for 2 or 3 weeks while I was on the ship, so it could be cleaned out to get any infection. They also gave me the 14-day rabies series of shots. Then after that, they did a skin graft, taking the skin off the front of my legs.

**The tiger had just taken your bicep and chewed it off.**

Yes. He just removed everything on the front side of the arm down to the bone.

**But the skin graft took care of that pretty well.**

There's no muscle in there. The skin graft just covered up the area.

**Did they medevac you back to the States after that?**

I spent about 30 days or so on the *Sanctuary* and then they shipped me back to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. There a Dr. Smith did a tendon transplant so I could use my hand. Then I was discharged.

**How does your arm and hand work now?**

I have a lot of problems but it's useable. I can't lift anything; I've got no strength because I have no muscles. They used tendons that went to my shoulder, and my shoulder muscles help to move my hand.

**When were you discharged?**

In 1968.

**What do you do now?**

I'm a field engineer with Brunner and Lay, a manufacturer of drilling accessories for quarries and mines. I've been with them since '83.

**I understand they call you "Tiger Dave" and I guess you're pretty lucky to have survived that experience.**

Yes, I am.

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